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ABSTRACT

Answering a variety of questions about cross-age and peer tutoring, this digest provides information on how tutoring programs are organized, how to start programs, why tutoring programs are effective, and what the critical ingredients of peer programs are. The digest briefly discusses two examples of effective programs recognized by the National Diffusion Network (1992), as well as a program focusing on the language arts, particularly reading and oral comprehension, and using language-based games and activities. (RS)

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Cross-Age and Peer Tutoring

by Robert L. Thomas

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Cross-Age and Peer Tutoring

by Robert L. Thomas

What are they? Cross-age and peer tutoring are methods of instruction in which learners help each other and in turn learn by teaching.

- **Peer teaching or tutoring** is the process by which a competent pupil, with minimal training and with a teacher's guidance, helps one or more students at the same grade level learn a skill or concept.
- **Cross-age tutors** are students in higher grade levels who work with younger students.

How are tutoring programs organized? Peer and cross-age tutoring programs can take many forms, including the following:

- **Resource tutoring:** Where three or four pairs are scheduled together in the resource room.
- **Classroom tutoring:** Where teachers in two grades set aside a particular time and place for the tutoring and, in most instances, use cross-age tutoring.
- **Tailored tutoring:** Where a teacher chooses a criterion—such as vocabulary or fractions—by which to pair students. Both cross-age and peer pairs can be used in this pattern.
- **Ripple tutoring:** Where a school begins slowly with only a few groups and gradually expands until all students and teachers are involved (McAllister, 1990).

How does one get started? Some basic steps are:

- **Select tutors and students:** Start with those students most in need and eager to participate.
- **Design an appropriate program:** Planning is essential to ensuring smooth implementation and positive outcomes.
- **Train tutors:** Give an overview of what tutoring is, its values and goals, what to do during a session, and how to help the tutored students.
- **Select skills and content:** Some activities lend themselves well to peer teaching, such as drills and learning games. As skills develop, they need to be applied to classroom materials and content so that the student will experience immediate application of new knowledge.
- **Design a tutoring lesson:** Show the tutor how to manage a session, keeping steps to a minimum.
- **Monitor and evaluate the program:** During and at the end of the program, check for evidence of progress (McAllister, 1990).

Why are tutoring programs effective? Tutoring programs can be structured so that both tutors and students benefit. According to the research, peer relationships contribute to social and cognitive development and socialization. Learning, friendship, and social growth are often positive outcomes.

Some specific benefits of tutoring programs include:

- Children learn positive attitudes, values, and skills through peer modeling.
- Through peer interaction, children learn to share, to help, to comfort, and to empathize with others.
- Peer relationships have a strong influence on achievement.
- Peer relationships are a powerful influence on a child's development of identity and autonomy (Benard, 1990).

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What are critical ingredients of peer programs? Some ingredients appear essential to creating effective peer programs. They are:

- students must relate to one another to achieve common goals;
- students must be personally accountable for mastering the material and for helping each other, and must understand that it is to their advantage if other students learn;
- students must learn how to build and maintain collaborative relationships;
- in peer tutoring programs, each child must be given an opportunity to be the helper or to lend a cooperative learning group; and,
- groups must be as heterogeneous as possible in academic ability, ethnicity, and physical disabilities (Benard, 1990).

What are some examples of effective programs? The U. S. Department of Education selected the **Valued Youth Program** for special recognition and dissemination through the National Diffusion Network (NDN). It is a cross-age tutoring program where at-risk secondary students tutor younger, elementary school students. This program is being used in 17 elementary and secondary schools in five states (National Diffusion Network, 1992).

Student Team Learning (STL) is a validated program in which students are placed in four- or five-member heterogeneous learning teams to master basic skills initially presented by the teacher (National Diffusion Network, 1992).

What is an example of an effective program specifically in the Language Arts?

A recent experimental cross-age tutoring program in one school district focused on language work, including reading, oral comprehension, and language-based games and activities (Gautrey, 1990). For these projects, children chose books to read which were of interest to them and which they considered were on an appropriate reading level.

One project elementary school provided a set of interest-based books, and at every session the tutee and tutor selected together a book of common interest to both of them. First and foremost was that the tutors and tutees enjoyed simply reading together and discussing the books afterward. This was especially effective as an introductory activity for the project. Sometimes the tutee read to the tutor, and then the two exchanged roles. Story writing could be a natural offshoot of this activity.

In all the projects, language games and activities were elaborated by the tutors themselves, according to the needs and abilities of the tutee. These activities proved to be creatively planned by the tutors. Although some of the tutors were apprehensive at first at the idea of playing teacher, a consistent and constructive relationship with the organizing teacher seemed to be what spelled the difference between success and failure of the projects.

All projects took place right in the classroom. Some of the activities (all developed by the tutors) which were included in the projects were (1) board games (such as "Shoots and Ladders"); (2) word searches (themes included names, animals, etc.); (3) crosswords; (4) spelling games (picking out a deliberate mistake, for example); (5) spot the difference (a discussion of nearly identicial pictures); (6) paired poetry writing; (7) sentence writing by selecting words from pictures; (8) scrambled words; and (9) grand prix (reading games in racing car circuit). (For more examples of appropriate and effective games and activities, see Salmond, 1983).

The opinion of everyone concerned (tutors, tutees, teachers, and administrators) was that the projects were "successful and enjoyable" and should be continued (Gautrey, 1990).

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